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ABSTRACT

Examples from the data of a study of television programing for adolescents in Sweden illustrate some of the differences in the ways programs address their male and female viewers. Whereas boy and girl characters in television programs are roughly equal in number, the distribution changes when only leading roles are considered. A marked imbalance occurs among characters 10 to 15 years of age. By the age of approximately 10 years, viewers are led to believe that girls are secondary, accessory figures. When girls do occupy leading roles, it may well be "in partnership" with a boy. Program content is such that preteen and teen-aged boys can identify with TV figures who are active, inquisitive, determined individuals. Girls of the same ages can identify with subordinate figures or with girls with problems. The suspicion cannot be dismissed that such programs instill self-confidence, initiative, and faith in the future in boys, and that they caution girls to passivity. Data from a study of television programs produced or purchased by the Educational Broadcasting Company reveal a similar tendency. Programs for upper-level primary and secondary school classes were extremely male-dominated. Even foreign language training films used in Swedish upper-level primary schools exhibit sex bias. All of the young male characters are in school or training, whereas none of the girls are. (RH)

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IMPLICIT MESSAGES TO TEEN-AGED VIEWERS

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IMPLICIT MESSAGES TO TEEN-AGED VIEWERS

Swedish broadcasting is bound by law to promote equality of the sexes in the programming it offers. This has been the case since 1978, when the current Radio Act came into force. In the ensuing four years several studies of the images of men and women conveyed in Swedish broadcast fare have been made.[1] All these studies indicate that it is still a long way to equality of the sexes in Swedish radio and television fare.

Of course, the media can hardly be expected to faithfully record reality in all its myriad nuances. No medium can be all-encompassing. Consequently, the media select certain facets of life, certain aspects of reality. The choice is not sheerly random, but is dictated by values deeply rooted in cultural tradition and praxis.

While it might seem easy enough to identify instances of inequality, of "sexist bias", in programming, content analyses on this theme have proven far from straightforward, cut-and-dried undertakings. We are all so imbued with the values of our culture that it is often difficult - at the outset, in any case - to conceive of alternatives to the traditional patterns. The effort may furthermore be painful, inasmuch as we are forced to recognize the degree of inequality that actually does prevail. For members of the disadvantaged sex it may feel humiliating to always come up with the shorter straw, whereas privileged individuals may perceive a threat in having their advantages pointed out. Consequently, we - men and women alike - tend to rationalize our findings, and inequalities live on.

In order to illustrate some of the differences in how programmes address their male and female viewers, respectively, I shall very briefly present a few examples from a couple of analyses. Here I shall focus on television programming addressed to adolescent audiences. The target audiences for these programmes are quite specifically "young teens", that is, a phase of life in which adult roles begin to be articulated.

* * *

The sample of fictional programming (drama, films, series/serials and cartoons) I have been working with includes over 100 programmes intended for children and young adults.[2] My sample consisted of five weeks of programming scattered over a one-year period. Some of the programmes were segments in series or instalments in serials, in which cases I have combined them into a single unit. As a result, the material "boiled down" to a total of sixty units of analysis.

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1) Cf. Bibliography.

2) The TV-World and Reality (in progress).

Several studies have demonstrated that women and girls tend mainly to identify with women and girls - in books, films, television fare. Similarly, men and boys tend to identify with male characters. The identification process can be of different sorts. We generally differentiate between "similarity identification" and "wishful identification". The former refers to identification with a figure because he or she is in some way or another like us. Wishful identification refers to cases in which we step into a character's shoes because we wish we could be that person and share his or her resources and experiences.

It is hard to say what characters boys and girls of various ages might wish to be, but we can classify the characters in television programmes so that they "match" boys and girls in the viewing audience in at least one respect, viz. age. Thus, all the children and adolescents in the sixty units of analysis have been catalogued according to age. It turns out that each age-group contains roughly as many girls as boys (with a slight predominance of boys in one age-group). In the light of what we know about the respective frequencies of male and female figures in other types of programming this finding is surprisingly favourable.

Here it should be noted that this distribution holds when all characters are included, even very minor roles. When we consider leading roles only, the picture changes:

	Leading roles[1)]	
	Girls	Boys
Toddlers (0-3 years)	1	0
Preschoolers (4-6 years)	4	4
Lower primary (7-9 years)	3	2
Middle primary (10-12 years)	4	8
Upper primary (13-15 years)	3	6
Secondary school (16-18 years)	1	4
	16	24

While the distribution is fairly evenly balanced among the youngest age-groups, we find a marked imbalance among 10- to 15-year-olds. When we go one step further and consider the nature of the leading roles girls and boys play, the emergent pattern gives cause for thought.

Teen-agers - eight boys and four girls - had leading roles in eight "real-life" dramas. Let me introduce them. First, the programmes with male leads only:

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1) One may wonder why there are only forty leading roles in sixty units of analysis. This is due to the fact that many children's programmes have adults or fairy-tale figures in the leading roles. This is especially the case in fantasies and more or less fanciful programmes. Programmes with children and adolescents in leading roles are predominantly "real-life" dramas, etc.

Bombi Bitt is a neglected rascal of a lad in a southern Swedish village around the turn of the century. He is the son of the village whore. The story is told in the past tense by Eli, who is now an old man. It all happened way-back-when, when Eli was a lad of twelve and Bombi Bitt, whom Eli idolized, was nearly fifteen. The day Bombi Bitt and Eli became friends was the proudest day in Eli's life! Their friendship opened up a foreign, forbidden, thrilling world that Eli otherwise never would have known. In the episode studied the boys follow along on a midnight fishing tour with poachers Jöns Pumpare and Wricklund. (Wricklund is a bear of a man, a drinkard who brawls and bellows, whom nothing seems to phase.) They hide in the attic at Bombi Bitt's mother's place and overhear her and a couple of strangers plotting to steal the church silver on Sunday at midnight. Bombi Bitt is adventure personified. (BOMBI BITT OCH JAG, Swedish series based on classic novel by Fritiof Nilsson Piraten.)

Tom Sawyer and his classmate Becky have got lost in a cave. The cave is a big one, and a search party has failed to find them. Only after several days does Tom manage to find a way out with the help of a kite string he happened to have in his pocket. (By this time Becky has swooned of exhaustion.) While exploring, Tom sees a mysterious figure in the cave, and he suspects there may be hidden treasure there. He and his friend Huckleberry Finn return to the cave and find the treasure. They are rich! Huck, who has been living in a beer barrel down by the river, is adopted by a wealthy widow. He is unhappy living there and runs away, but Tom persuades him to come back and join a "röbber band" he is organizing. (TOM SAWYER AND HUCKLEBERRY FINN, American series adapted from the classic novels by Mark Twain.)

Palle is a working-class youngster in Stockholm of the twenties and thirties. A communist, he dreams of the revolution. He works as a delivery-boy for a florist's shop. Evenings he practices his debating technique on less ardent friends. One night Palle dreams that the courtyard in his block of flats is filled with red banners and that he urges the crowd to stick together and fight for the cause of solidarity. (DE RÖDAS UPPROR, Swedish serial based on a novel by Harry Kullman)

Albin goes to sea as a galley boy. (The story takes place in the era of sailing ships.) This is the first ship in his career as a seaman; he aims to become the skipper of his own ship one day. An old sea dog tells him tales of the sea, about ships and his memories from a long life at sea. (KOCK-JUNGMAN SÖKES, Swedish short film.)

When his father loses his job, Tom and his family move from Tampa Florida, to New York City. It is a tough neighbourhood and hard to adjust to. Tom starts shining shoes to earn some money, and he meets Aurelio. Through their acquaintance Tom starts playing music, which proves to be a turning point in his life. The two boys are asked to play at various parties, and they start making money. Tom plans to study to become a professional musician. At a party one evening, the boys make a real "hit" with a blues of their own. Even Tom's father - out-of-work and depressed - is moved by and happy for his son's success. (NEW YORK CITY, TOO FAR FROM TAMPA BLUES, American short film.)

A couple of programmes in the sample had both a boy and a girl in leading roles:

Skip is editor of the school paper at an American highschool. He thinks the paper could be more interesting and has an idea how to increase its popularity: they should start a "lonely hearts" column with an anonymous columnist. Skip persuades Carry, one of the girls on the staff, to become "Miss Lovey Hart". The column appears to be quite a success; everyone is talking about it. But some readers take it all too seriously, and troubles mount. Carry's father, who happens to be the school psychologist, is concerned. Carry, too, is worried by the number of serious problems broached to Lovey Hart, which she feels she is not equipped to deal with. Skip persuades her to continue. One day, however, Lovey Hart's identity is inadvertently revealed. Carry's friends are upset with her. She runs away, but pulls herself together and confesses all to her father, while she also announces her resignation in the paper. Her father is satisfied, and Skip invites her to the cinema. (DEAR LOVEY HART: I AM DESPERATE ..., American short film.)

James and Karen work on the school paper (!). They manage to wangle an assignment to interview a well-known, but publicity-shy basketball star. They succeed and are congratulated for a good job of reporting. Their next challenge is an interview with a famous woman journalist, whom Karen idolizes. Karen, however, breaks down under the pressure (of her own expectations of herself?) and comes to the interview a half-hour late and drunk. The journalist gives her an upbraiding and leaves. After this fiasco, Karen drops out of sight. James tries repeatedly to get in touch with her. When he finally locates her, he finds she is an alcoholic and that she has spent practically every evening the past two months at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (the American organization devoted to self-rehabilitation). Another evening Karen turns up at James' home, drunk, loud and "wild". James' parents send her away, after which she again drops out of sight. James and his friends find her again and try to make her promise to change her ways. Just when they are ready to give up and let her sink "down and out", she comes round. In the final scene she is on her way to an AA meeting together with James - neat and clean, grateful and optimistic. (JAMES AT 15 16, American series.)

Finally, a series with teen-aged girls in the lead: Annie is home alone and bored. Her friend Sheila comes to visit. They watch television together. A programme offering advice to the love-lorn (!) comes on, and it turns out to treat Sheila's letter. Sheila dreams of romantic love (she thinks of love as something beautiful, something she would keep "in a box all golden"), but she thinks people ruin it all with their talk about rape, the pill and all that. Her boyfriend Burt's friends all tease him because he and Sheila don't sleep together. When they do make love, Sheila becomes pregnant - and Burt berates her for not having taken precautions. (Sheila is thirteen.) Annie, too, has written to the programme. Her problem is that nobody pays attention to her. She feels "non-existent". She is truant from school, she steals spirits from home and gets herself drunk. Noone seems to notice. She slashes a seat-cushion on the underground,

but the other passengers look away. She tries drugs, and - finally - she is put in the custody of a social worker. When she tries to slash the upholstery in his car, he stops her with force. At last, someone has "seen" her! (SLÖDDER /= Rabble/, Swedish series.)

* * *

Face to face with such material, one's first reaction is one of incredulity. Can the sample be that distorted? Is there reason to believe that tha patterns we note are products of unfortunate coincidence? Any sample involves some measure of uncertainty. On the other hand, there are also legitimate reasons to portray girls with problems - one who is an alcoholic, one who feels "invisible", who is lonely and slashes a seat in the tube in protest. Boys hardly have a monopoly on problems of this sort; girls, too, can be asocial, desperate. It is important to point out that these problems afflict young people of both sexes. Most probably such a rationale lay behind the conception of the programmes discussed here. Unfortunately, effects are not always identical with intent.

We have not studied the effects of these programmes, but when we collate the material like this and consider the programmes as a whole, we are stricken by the suspicion that they may have effects on quite another plane than the people who produced or purchased them had in mind. Altogether, the patterns revealed here suggest that boys and girls get entirely different messages from what they see on television. Already at age ten or thereabouts, viewers are led to believe that girls are secondary, accessory figures. Noone says so outright, of course, but "evidence" to that effect is presented in programme upon programme,series upon series. When girls do occupy leading roles, it may well be "in partnership" with a boy (as in the case of James and Karen, Skip and Carry). Whatever the case, the girl is in for trouble!

Preteen and teen-aged boys can identify with TV-figures involved in adventure, figures who dare and who succeed, who chart and plan and dream about their futures - active, inquisitive, determined individuals. Girls of the same ages can identify with subordinate figures or with girls with problems of various kinds, girls who fail, who are lonely, girls who get pregnant. One cannot dismiss the suspicion that programmes like these, while they instill self-confidence, initiative and faith in the future in boys, caution girls to passivity. Girls should beware of dangers, seek security, support and assistance, but not make waves!

* * *

Data from another study[1)] reveal a similar tendency. A study of television programmes produced or purchased by the Educational Broadcasting Company covered two weeks of programming for all target audiences, from preschoolers through adults.

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1) U B Abrahamsson. Equality of the Sexes in Educational Television?

School-TV for upper-level primary and secondary school classes are of special interest here as they address audiences of young people between the ages of 13 and 18.

Judging from our material, there seems to occur a definite shift from child to adult in Swedish schools at age thirteen. Fanciful fictional content disappears from the menu after grade six; factual documentary takes over entirely. The shift is marked, and formal characteristics of the programmes underline it. The message is: This is serious business; this is important.

School television programmes are used as complements in classroom instruction. Thus, they are part of the milieu that fosters and forms pupils' conceptions of reality, of the world around them. The programmes set out to impart certain bits of knowledge. Inadvertently and incidentally, however, they also impart quite other statements about reality, which the pupils - incidentally and perhaps subconsciously - register.

The programmes for upper-level primary and secondary school classes in our sample were extremely male-dominated. The unmistakable impression is that facts are provided by men, experts are men, men understand important events and processes in the world around us. Women's competence apparently runs out at the middle-level.

Male dominance of this type may be expected to affect the pedagogic result. The programmes communicate their implicit "lesson" quite clearly: expectations of girls are not as high as they are of boys. Since the vast majority of sources of factual information in the programmes (scientists, politicians engineers, artists, etc.) are men, pupils are likely to get the impression that women are somehow poorly suited for such occupations. Can it be that women are simply less gifted for such work? And - if this be the case - why should girls even bother studying these subjects?

The implicit message to boys on the other hand is quite another: This is something men devote themselves to, this is a subject for males. You are a boy - it concerns you!

The situation is not improved by the fact that non-educational factual programming (news and documentaries) is also male-dominated. Many girls do in fact conclude that they have no talent for subjects and occupations in which men predominate on the labour market. When it comes time to specialize, to choose a course of study, girls and boys continue to make their choices according to traditional patterns. Of course, media content is only one of many contributing factors. But television programming could afford a means by which to disrupt traditional thinking by presenting new, "deviant" paragons.

* * *

The language-training films used in Swedish upper-level primary schools are a special type of factual programmes. The typical format is "reportage" from the countries in which the language in question is spoken. Several language series have roughly the same structure. Generally, viewers follow one or several persons throughout the programme. This provides continuity.

The focal persons are surely chosen with care. They are of the same age as the intended viewers, a sign that the producers have sought to give pupils a "natural" acquaintance with a peer in the foreign culture, someone to identify with. My material allows us to compare the boys and girls presented in three different language-training series:

In West Germany we meet:

- Falk, 15, who plays the trumpet and piano in two school orchestras. He also plays volleyball. Falk hopes to become a goldsmith.

- Eckard, 13, who lives on a farm and plans to study biology after completing secondary school. He keeps doves.

- Regina, 14, who shops for bread and sausage and talks about her family's meals.

Austria is represented by:

- Kurt, 17, from Vienna. He is very bright, does well in school and is a talented pianist (popular as well as classical music). He is trying to decide between becoming a physician, an actor or a pianist.

- Hanna, 18, who is working for the time being in a ready-to-wear garment factory in Vienna. A professionally trained hair-dresser, she had to change jobs because she was allergic to the chemicals. In roughly two years' time she hopes to marry and have children.

In Great Britain we meet:

- Christine, 17, who inspects fabrics in a textile factory. She lives together with her mother. Christine plans to go out with friends Friday night, and she is busy preparing her wardrobe for the occasion.

- Kenny, 17, who lives in a fishing village in Scotland. He is in a three-year course, learning how to construct drilling platforms for use in the North Sea. The oil industry there has opened up new opportunities in the former fishing village.

It would be too much to expect these programmes to capture what is "typical" for a country, its people or culture. The variety is all too great, the dimensions all too many: town and country, different livelihoods and branches of industry, different social groups, different educational backgrounds, different temperaments and outlooks, different aspirations. The individuals the programmes focus on in order to concretize

and offer a specific referent can only be regarded as examples of how life can be in the country in question. There is no such thing as a typical teenager!

When we view the programmes one by one in their normal context and meet the characters one by one, it may not be so apparent that all the boys are in school or training, ambitiously and systematically planning for their futures, whereas none of the girls is. One girl (Regina) is presented more or less en passant, without our really getting to know very much about her. One girl (Hanna) is now - after being forced to leave her chosen line of work - only a temporary "guest" on the labour market. The third (Christine) plans only as far ahead as Friday night!

Perhaps the image of these girls simply corresponds with the stereotype-images of girls in the respective countries. The boys, however, are idealized. It is hardly likely, for example, that every Tom, Dick and Harry in Austria and West Germany is as extremely talented a musician as Kurt and Falk - just to mention one example.

Trying to identify some sort of "modal type" is not a very fruitful ambition. It is perfectly justifiable simply to present a handful of likable peers to convey an impression of a culture. But it would have been better had the girls, too, been idealized a bit. There is nothing wrong in wanting to marry and raise a family, but that needn't be the only ambition girls are depicted as having. Girls have other interests, too. Why not more personal, more inspired and inspiring portraits of girls - girls who don't entirely fit into the traditional mold? It shouldn't be all too hard to find such girls in Europe of today, where sex-roles are in fact changing.

* * *

Boys and girls are influenced and develop according to different ideals, and these ideals - or stereotypes - are so well integrated into our conceptions of reality that they are hardly even noticed, let alone questioned.

Promoting equality of the sexes means opening up all spheres of life to men and women on an equal footing - as citizens, as parents, bread-winners, as persons. On a deeper level, however, it is also a question of pointing out and rooting out a basic disdain or underestimation of women. The lessons that cue us as to "proper" male and female roles convey different messages to men and women. The messages are conveyed via numerous channels and in myriad situations in life. They have not only affected us adults; they affect our young people as well. Their ultimate result is a collective lack of self-confidence among women and a general scepticism - among men and women alike - regarding women's abilities.

Men and boys who know what they want and know what they can do; women who neither know nor can nor want! This pattern recurs again and again in the stories we are exposed to virtually from the cradle to the grave. Its incessant repetition chips away at girls' and women's confidence in themselves and their abilities just as continual dripping wears away the stone.

Indeed, this is one of the fundaments in theories of media effects and the formation of values in society: the omnipresent, seldom contradicted pattern tends to become "established truth". What television highlights for us gains reinforced significance. Television is the showcase of our culture, and therefore the norms and values programming conveys are more than a matter of indifference.

To "assert the principles of the equality of all human beings", as prescribed in the Swedish Radio Act, implies - among other things - making an active effort to alter traditional, deeply rooted preconceptions as to "male" and "female" roles. Such change will not come automatically. It will require a long, concerted effort. Necessarily, the very first step must be to recognize and point out inequality where it exists.

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